First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest
Amazing Grace
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Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

John Newton wrote it in 1779. A rough-edged seaman, known for his recalcitrance, trouble-making, and a level of profane vulgarity that was a scandal even to his shipmates, Newton went to sea as a young man, was pressed into service in the British Navy, ended up working in the slave trade, finally captaining his own slave ship. Although not particularly religious, during a ferocious storm that nearly capsized his ship and cost his life, he cried out in terror for God's mercy. And while his ship was in an Irish port for repairs, Newton apparently began to ponder his life–threatening experience and wrote the first stanza of a poem.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound. His conversion was gradual and eventuated in his entering the priesthood in the Church of England. In his first parish in Olney, Buckinghamshire, he met William Cowper, and together they wrote a number of hymns, including the rest of Amazing Grace.

What is it about Amazing Grace? Newton's biographer, Jonathan Aiken, estimates that it is sung 10 million times annually. It is not elegant music or great poetry. What is it about Amazing Grace that it ends up being sung – In worship by high church Anglicans and passionate evangelicals, in grand cathedrals and camp meetings, by operatic singers and folk singers, played by bagpipe bands and symphony orchestras? Judy Collins recorded it in 1970 and it became a hit, as did her album of the same title. It is played regularly at funerals for police officers by the Chicago Police Department Bagpipe Band and at countless memorial services.

What is it about Amazing Grace? I think it is because it touches something deep in the human heart, something almost deeper than consciousness, something that tells us we need help from outside ourselves, something almost primal in us that tells us we need to be rescued, saved, delivered by someone or something other than ourselves: that by ourselves alone, we aren't up to the job and will never get it done.

The name for that something is Grace.

The ancients knew that there was something going on in the world beyond their understanding; something invisible, mysterious. Most of life was out of their control, random, the weather, for instance, life-giving rain,

so absolutely necessary for life itself, for vegetation and crops to survive: but also storms that descended on them without warning, flooding, sweeping away, destroying. Heat and cold, wind and drought, lightning and thunder and earthquakes and disease that came out of nowhere, not to mention the unpredictable mystery of fertility, conception, birth and new life upon which, everybody understood, everything depended.

From the earliest days of recorded time, human beings have sought to do something about the unanticipated, random threats and the equally mysterious, seemingly random abundance, fecundity, health, security and well-being.

Perhaps it would be good to do whatever we can to persuade the fates, the mystery, the gods, to look kindly on us. Perhaps it's a good idea to devise ways to convince those gods, if not to be pleased with us, at least to refrain from visiting tragedy and hunger and suffering and death on us.

The earliest form of religion grew out of that dynamic: loosely organized ways to placate and persuade the gods to be kind.

Perhaps gifts would do the job: gifts of crops, our cattle, costly gifts of life itself, our children, for instance, or one of our tribe or clan: sacrifices to please the gods.

A loose religion emerged. Someone had to be in charge, someone to supervise, someone to tell the tribe what the gods wanted and needed, someone to manage the offerings of grain, someone to slaughter the sacrificial animals. There had to be a place to do it, a place set apart, a sacred, holy place, a shrine, an altar. And so holy men emerge, shamans, priests, who gradually assume sacredness and holiness themselves. So there it is: necessary sacrifices, someone to do it and a place to do it in: the components of rudimentary religion.

Ancient Israel was surrounded by it, and to be sure, there are hints of it in Israel's history and scriptures. The captives certainly witnessed it in the highly sophisticated and ritualized religion of Imperial Egypt. They saw it in the Temples of Ancient Babylon during their exile, and they encountered it in the religion of the Canaanites when they entered the Promised Land. The people already in the land when the 12 tribes of Israel arrived had their own worship. It was basically a fertility religion, the purpose of which was to persuade the Canaanite gods, Baal, or the Baals, to bless the people with rich soil and abundant crops and healthy cattle and most of all, babies, lots of babies. The Canaanites left behind exquisite carvings and statues of Baal, some of them vividly sexual.

The story of Israel, although influenced by the religion of their neighbors, nevertheless begins quite differently. In the earliest Hebrew scriptures God initiates the action. God, more or less out of the blue, comes

to Abraham in his old age and tells Abraham that he's going to be a father – news that makes his wife Sarah laugh, or at least giggle. God tells Abraham to move, that he will be the father of a great nation. God is the initiator, acting without any prompting by Abraham. When the people of Israel find themselves in slavery in Egypt, God hears their groaning and weeping and does something: comes to Moses in a burning bush in the wilderness, and through Moses sets the people free from their bondage and leads them through the Red Sea and wilderness towards the Promised Land. God is the main actor, the initiator. God acts, people respond and their response to God's action, praise and gratitude, is their religion. When the 12 tribes have been liberated from Egyptian slavery and are wandering through the wilderness they come to Mt. Sinai. God summons Moses to the mountaintop and gives Moses 10 Commandments, which are the rudimentary structure of their religion and society – a religion that is a personal and corporate response to the goodness and love of God. The purpose of the entire law of Moses is to be a grateful response to the God who brought us out of Egypt and led us through the wilderness into the promised land, a grateful, joyful response to the God who did not need to be persuaded to be good, but the God whose goodness and love are given, the very nature of God.

And yet, the ancient idea that God must either be placated or persuaded to be loving and kind by human activity is deeply ingrained and keeps creeping back into religion. When their city and Temple are destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BCE and the people are sent into exile, many in Israel concluded that the whole thing was evidence that God must have been angry, very angry. And so, when 70 years later they return to Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple the general consensus was that we better not let that happen again. We better become really good, really righteous. We better knock ourselves out obeying all the laws and performing all the rituals and making all the sacrifices. Two groups in Israel emerge as the guardians of the new urgency for righteousness and law keeping: Pharisees and Sadducees. They will be dominant forces in the nation, now under brutal Roman occupation when Jesus appears and begins to teach that God doesn't have to be persuaded to love: that it is the very nature of God to love: that, incredibly, God even takes the initiative and reaches out to people, doesn't wait for an annual performance evaluation, but – like the father in his most famous story, comes running down the road to welcome and embrace a lost child.

It is the issue that dominates the life of the early church. The first followers of Jesus were Jews, as he was. There were communities of believers in Galilee where most of the disciples returned after the crucifixion and resurrection. And there was a community of followers that remained in Jerusalem itself. The tradition is that the leader of the Jerusalem community was James, the brother of Jesus. After Saul of Tarsus's, now Paul, conversion a few years later, he began to teach and

proclaim the Gospel in Synagogues, but a new phenomenon began to happen. Non-Jews, Gentiles – the New Testament lumps them all together and calls them Greeks – were compelled by Paul. Immediately a controversy erupted. Some of the Jewish Christian leaders insisted that a new convert to Christianity had to become a Jew first, adopting Jewish law, the dietary restrictions, rituals and tradition including – for the men – circumcision. Paul pushed back. The Good News is for everyone, he argued. Representatives from the Jerusalem church began to visit the communities where Paul had established a church that included Jews and Gentiles and argued that if the Gentiles hadn't become Jewish, including circumcision, they weren't really Christian. The conflict became heated. Finally Paul traveled to Jerusalem for the first ever Council, an early General Assembly to try to resolve the issue. It's a long and great story in the Book of Acts 10 & 11 which includes Peter's dream in which God assures him that it alright to eat food forbidden by the law and it is equally fine to welcome and baptize Cornelius, a non-Jew – which Peter does. The issue was finally resolved. The Gospel is for everyone: Jews, Greeks, Gentiles, Romans, Africans, Asians.

That's the social, political issue. Beneath it is a theological issue. How is it that one receives the gift of new life, reconciliation with God, salvation? Is it as a result of obeying the religious laws, following the Ten Commandments, abstaining from forbidden foods, keeping the Sabbath? Or is it, as Paul began to argue, because God loves you and saves you before and apart from all those religious acts? In a letter he wrote to the Church in Rome, he confronts it head on discussing at length the law and the grace of God. Back and forth he goes, explaining the law and then, always, turning to the gift of God's love that came to him, comes to all, without condition.

"God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." Romans 5:8

Does that mean that the law is irrelevant, that it doesn't ultimately matter whether we try to be good, righteous, faithful? By no means! Paul responded. It simply means that we are loved by God before we do anything or refrain from doing anything. Grace is amazing. "It is by grace you have been saved, through faith," he wrote. [Ephesians 2:8] God's grace comes before anything else. Religion: religious rules, rituals, tradition – don't earn us God's approval. We already have it. Religion is simply a grateful response to the gift we have been given in Jesus Christ. Someone said it is as if you entered a classroom prepared to study hard, do well on the final exam and get a good grade, and on the first day of class that professor said: "Relax. You already have an A. Now, let's see what we can learn."

It simply reverses the dynamic of historical religion. Grace comes first. All the rest is grateful response. But, of course, it doesn't end there.

As Christianity put roots deeply into the soil of the Roman Empire and after the 4th century was not only allowed to operate freely, to own property, for instance, and hold public meetings, but not long after became the official state religion of Rome, the church started looking and acting like an institution, a big, robust, growing religious institution. The leaders of the early, primitive communities were called “Presbyteros” in Greek – we translate the word “Elders.” The early church and the Roman church ever since translate it “Bishops.” The leader of the churches in a city was called the Bishop, in major cities the Bishop was called a Metropolitan. The bishop of Rome, capital and largest city by far was called: “Father of the Bishops: Papa: Pope.” Historians observe that the early and medieval church organized itself on the only political model it knew: empire. Authority at the top: in one select person, who rules absolutely, distributing authority as necessary to loyal underlings who then exercise it over everyone else. One historian observed that out of the ashes of the Roman Empire emerged the Papacy, and the medieval church, which became the strongest, wealthiest institution on earth.

But beneath it all the old theological question of how exactly human beings access the love of God and their salvation was simmering again. The Church, slowly but surely, began to act like religion: putting conditions on God’s love, creating rules and regulations and traditions and obligations by which an individual might become deserving of God’s love, might actually earn salvation based on his or her zeal in keeping all the laws, observing all the ordinances, attending Mass and holidays and festivals, saying the Rosary, giving tithes and alms, i.e. salvatian by works.

Beneath that, of course, there also always simmered a counter message: that salvation is free and that religion is not the way you earn it but the way to express gratitude for it. By the Middle Ages the Papacy had continued to grow stronger and larger. Now there was a full Papal treasury: Papal armies, Papal foreign policy, papal authority to crown monarchs and depose monarchs. The Church was looking and acting like an empire. A Basilica in Rome named for St. Peter was commissioned to represent the power and authority of the church. And one of the ways the church devised to pay for it all was by income from vast real estate holdings, assessments from Dioceses and Parishes and the sale of Indulgences. An Indulgence was a way to reduce the amount of time spent in Purgatory and they were for sale. You could buy one for yourself, or a family member. It was a great marketing devise and successful business plan. Salesmen were commissioned and dispatched to diocese and parishes everywhere to sell Indulgence.

But the simmering beneath the surface continued. A brilliant but restless German Augustiniam monk, Martin Luther, was having a personal religious crisis. No matter what he did, he didn’t feel right about his soul. He entered a monastery, fasted, did everything the church required,

followed all the rules, flagellated himself in his cell, took a Pilgrimage to Rome and visited the holy sites and saw all the relics. Still, it wasn't right. In fact, more and more he felt like a prisoner: that religion was the oppressor and the more he did the worse he felt.

Luther was a brilliant scholar and in his monk's cell in Wittenberg, Germany was working his way through Paul's Letter to the Romans. He read – and pondered.

"God proves his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

"While we were enemies we were reconciled with God."

"God's love has been poured into our hearts."

"Since we are justified (saved) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." [Romans 5]

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God: they are now justified by his grace as a gift." [Romans 4:23]

It was as if a great load had been lifted from his shoulders. He was loved by God. Saved by God's grace. He was free.

When a Papal Indulgence salesman came to Wittenberg, where he taught in the University, Luther, who was now an ordained priest, wrote 99 Theses that challenged the entire theological base, and not only of Indulgences, but ultimately the entire operational power structure of the church. On All Souls Day, October 30, 1517, he nailed his 99 Theses to the door of the castle church along with an invitation to debate, as was the custom. The rest is history. Luther wanted to have a discussion. The church hierarchy immediately and accurately understood that his ideas were a direct threat to the authority of the church itself. He was summoned to a hearing in the city of Worms. It was called the Diet of Worms. The Holy Roman Emperor presided. Luther was ordered to recant. He refused. "I cannot," he said. "Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God." He was convicted. Somehow he managed to get out of town. There was a price on his head. Friends secreted him away to the Castle of Wartburg where he spent his time breaking more laws by translating scripture into German – and in the process helping to shape the modern German language, and he wrote what became the anthem of the Reformation, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

The Reformation literally exploded in Europe. There are many reasons, among them growing, festering resentment of the church and the financial assessments on the part of wealthy and powerful German princes.

Luther was the man they had been waiting for. They became his allies. The rise of nationalism and the nation state is another contributing reason.

Condensing long and complicated history now, Luther returned to Wittenberg and assumed leadership of the parish church. All over Germany the same thing was happening. Parish churches, dioceses entire were breaking ties with Rome and calling themselves Lutheran Churches. Luther's ideas were received and welcome throughout Germany, the Low Countries, Switzerland, England, and France – as far away as modern Croatia and Italy.

A young and brilliant French lawyer, John Calvin, was interested in Luther's ideas and the movement they inspired – The Reformation, and gradually began to adapt and expand them into an altogether different idea of the church. Luther never set out to reinvent the church, merely to reform it. Calvin started out at the beginning by asking, as Luther had, how it is that human beings relate to God and God to human beings and thoroughly agreed with Luther that it wasn't because human beings could earn or win God's love and favor but because it was the very nature of God to be loving. Calvin then addressed himself to church structures and government to reflect his theology. Authority, Calvin reasoned, reaching all the way back to ancient Greece, is not top down, from God to Pope to Bishop to Priests to administer over the people. It was exactly the opposite. Authority begins at the bottom, not the top. God gives the people the authority and the right to exercise it by choosing ministers and elders to administer the church. Protestantism, particularly the Calvinist variety was making real inroads in France. French Protestants were called Huguenots. The French monarchy took a very dim view of the whole thing – particularly Calvin's idea that authority was lodged in the people who have the right to elect representatives. That sounded revolutionary – which it was. The final resolution in France was the ghastly slaughter of the Huguenots in Paris and throughout France on St. Bartholomew's Day, August 24, 1572, 70,000 in all – an event celebrated all the way to the Papal palace in Rome – the pope commissioned a medallion. Calvin himself was exiled and ended up a refugee in Geneva, Switzerland where the city had recently sided with the Reformation – i.e. required the priests to become Protestant ministers or leave town. The city authorities asked Calvin to stay and lead the church and he did and organized the church on the basis of his radical ideas: Ministers elected by the people to preach and teach and administer the sacraments and Elders – together a Consistory, later a Session, to exercise authority. It was a revolutionary political idea as well – containing the seeds of what would become Republican Democracy. Martin Marty says that United States Constitution and the structure of our government are pure Calvinism.

Calvin was not perfect. He could be autocratic – and often was – in spite of his democratic thinking. When Servetus, condemned by both

Catholic and Lutheran churches as a heretic and a real trouble maker for his theological beliefs, landed in Geneva, he was arrested and Calvin consented to his burning at the stake. But Geneva was a haven of religious freedom. Refugees from all over Europe and Great Britain flooded to Geneva. One of them was a Scottish priest, University Professor and chaplain to the Queen, John Knox, who had led a popular revolt against the Catholic leadership in St. Andrews, Scotland was arrested and spent several years as a slave at the oars of a French galley ship. Knox found Calvin's ideas compelling, became pastor of an English speaking Reformed Church in Geneva, returned to Scotland to lead the Scottish Reformation. The result ultimately was pretty much the end of Mary Queen of Scots, an avid Catholic, and The Church of Scotland, now Reformed and Presbyterian in doctrine and government.

And it all began with grace: with the idea that human beings are put right with God not because of anything they did or do, not because they affirmed right doctrines or followed church rules or bought Indulgences or anything else, but because in Jesus Christ God has showered everyone with grace, unmerited, unearned, unconditional, abundant love. Amazing Grace.

It has profound social, political and personal implications. It rests on a wholly new notion of humanity – loved by God, endowed by God with authority to decide questions of leadership and governance. It is no accident that authoritative political structures, absolute monarchs, and dictators have condemned it, rightly understanding its revolutionary potential.

And it has deeply meaningful personal implications. It is no secret that most of us, deep down, don't have a great opinion of ourselves, not quite sure we're all right and acceptable. In fact, many of us struggle all our lives with a negative self image, perhaps as a result of our upbringing and never quite living up to our parents' or others' expectations. Many of us spend our lives trying to do more, always more, to meet those expectations. In the 60s a book by the name of I'm OK, You're OK became a huge bestseller because it addressed, in psychological terms, our mostly unsuccessful life-long effort to be OK. Religion has not always been helpful, reminding people that they are not at all ok, but deeply flawed, corrupt, depraved, and that the possibility of eternal torment in a hell of fire and pain is quite possible, if not probable.

But what if it isn't true? What if you are ok? What if God loves you just as you are? Wouldn't that make all the difference in the world? Wouldn't that be joyful and liberating? Wouldn't that be simply amazing?

The most eloquent description of grace I know was written by one of the great Christian intellectuals of the 20th century, Paul Tillich. He was an ordained Lutheran minister, a chaplain in the German Army in WWI, Professor at the Universities of Dresden, Tubingen, Leipzig, and Marburg,

who was ordered by Hitler's Third Reich to leave the country. Tillich taught philosophy and theology at Harvard, Union Seminary in New York City and the University of Chicago. Many of us, including me, found him very difficult to read and understand. But his sermons were crystal clear, simple and elegant.

Here is an excerpt from one of them, You Are Accepted:

> "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life, a life that we loved, or from which we were estranged. It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. *You are accepted,* accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"

And old John Calvin, known more for his sternness and strictness, wrote what I think is one of the most grace-filled hymns, my favorite:

I gree Thee, who

My sure redeemer art.

My only trust and

Savior of my heart

Thou hast the true

And perfect gentleness

No harshness hast thou

and no bitterness.

O, grant to us

the grace we find in Thee

That we may dwell in

Perfect Unity.

Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.